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ABSTRACT

This paper examines factors that contribute to or inhibit the academic achievement of black students. The study is based on a process model that seeks to define interrelationships among the following elements: (1) the societal context, which is the level of prescriptive ideologies and structures; (2) the institutional context, which is the level of descriptive practices and policies; (3) the interpersonal context, including both teacher and student cultural characteristics, and the factor of cultural synchronization mediating their interaction; (4) the interplay between teacher expectations and student expectations; and (5) black student achievement. The paper focuses on two components of the model: prescriptive ideologies of the functions of education and equal opportunity; and descriptive practices such as tracking and the hidden curriculum. The paper contends that, contrary to prescriptive doctrine, schools operate overtly and covertly to institutionalize the "caste-like" status of black children, acting as a primary instrument by which the powerful maintain the status quo. The hidden curriculum, which inculcates bias and limitation through latent classroom transactions, and tracking, which consigns black children to educational ghettos, both subvert prescriptive educational ideologies. Alternatives to the organization of instruction by ability are reviewed and recommended. The paper includes one figure. (AF)

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Black Students and School Achievement: A Process Model of Relationships Among Significant Variables

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This paper is based on a process model that attempts to explain some significant factors that either contribute to or inhibit the school achievement of black students. The model, depicted in Figure 1, originates with an understanding of the macro level of analysis. Within our society are prescriptive ideologies (1) and prescriptive social structures that are premised on normative belief systems. The principles of meritocracy and equal educational opportunity for children of any race or class are two examples of these "what should be" axioms. Prescriptions are goals and standards that societies use as standards to measure progress and as values to inculcate the young.

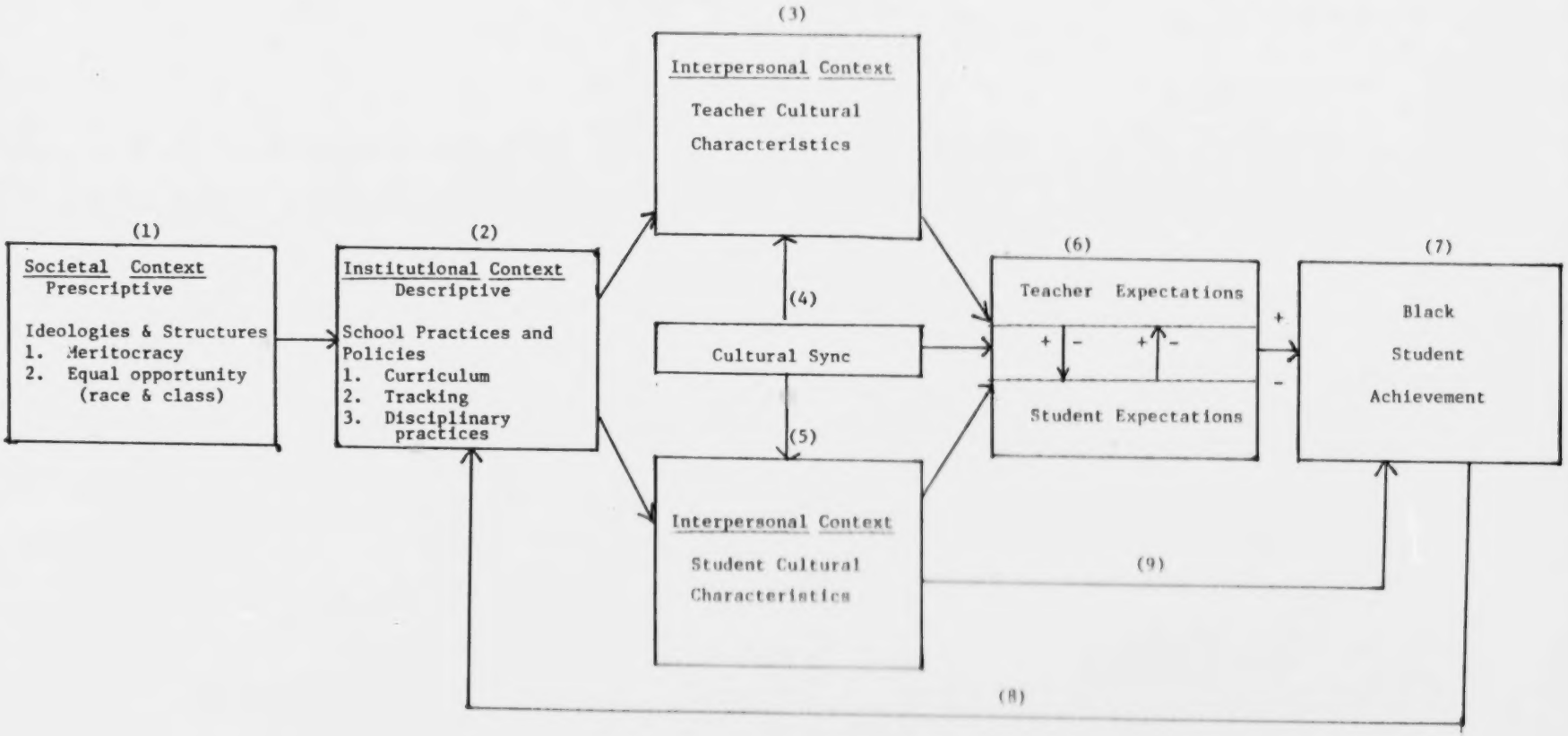
These ideologies are operationalized at the descriptive or institutional level (2), where the discrepancy between the prescriptive and the descriptive becomes apparent. Schools have common prescriptive goals, which lack distinctiveness and concreteness--good citizenship, responsibility, literacy, critical thinking skills, computational skills. But the race and the class of the children who attend a particular school, in fact, mediate the observed practices, policies, processes, and organizational structures of that school. For instance, schools that enroll students from lower-class homes often have more bureaucratized structures and are subjected to more rules (Anderson, 1975), have fewer financial resources, have fewer experienced teachers, use a system of rigid tracking, and suspend, expel, and discipline its students more harshly.

At the interpersonal level (3), the roles of teacher and student are defined by the institution. Both teachers and students receive messages from descriptive practices and processes about the behaviors and traits that seem appropriate to the role. Novice teachers learn early, for example, how much academic press is expected in a particular school, the degree to which familiarity with students is tolerated, and the role parents play in school decision making. Overt and subtle messages are communicated to students about their ability to succeed, their reliability, and their trustworthiness. Teachers' cultural characteristics (beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, worldview) race, sex, social class, prior sex role socialization, education and training, and personality characteristics affect the manner in which the role is enacted. Many black students, on the other hand, have a different set of cultural characteristics (5). For black children, their race and culture often act as the normative criteria by which the student is initially evaluated by his teacher--not as an individual but as a member of his or her referent group.

The factor of cultural synchronization (4) mediates the interaction of teacher and student in this model. When teachers and black students are in tune culturally, it can be expected that communication is enhanced, instruction is effective, and positive teacher affect is maximized. The presence or the absence of cultural sync influences the interaction of student and teacher expectations (6) both as self-fulfilling prophecies

FIGURE 1

A PROCESS MODEL FOR BLACK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



and as sustaining expectation effects. These expectations contribute to or hinder black student achievement. The feedback loop in the model (8) reflects the phenomenon in which black students' achievement or nonachievement reinforce the very institutional practices and policies that generated the expectations in the first instance.

The relationship between black students' cultural characteristics and their achievement in school (9) acknowledges that some of the characteristics and behaviors of black students are dysfunctional. In an article by Howard and Hammond (1985), black underachievement and the lack of achievement motivation were attributed to black students' acceptance and internalization of society's view that they are unlikely to succeed. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) cited negative peer pressure as inhibiting black achievement. In other words, many black students view achievement in school as a white characteristic, and black students who do achieve are ostracized and intimidated by their black peers. The authors recommended programs "to help the students learn to divorce academic pursuit from the idea of acting white." (p.203)

No model of black student achievement should ignore the fact that there are negative behaviors and attitudes which greatly deter black students' achievement. These maladjustments are often culturally specific and should be addressed by professional educators in the context of the students' home and community.

In this paper two specific components of the model are examined in more detail:

1. prescriptive ideologies of the functions of education and equal opportunity,
2. descriptive practices such as tracking and the hidden curriculum,

The components of cultural synchronization and teacher expectancy theory were examined in a previous presentation (Irvine, 1988).

Societal Prescriptions Concerning Education

Prescriptions are primarily societal ideologies which are endorsed by the majority culture. These standards and goals are valued by society and serve as guides or prescriptions for "what should be." Many educators concerned with the educational and social problems of black children direct their energy and expertise toward attaining the prescriptive view, a search reminiscent of the mythological quest for the elusive unicorn, a hoped-for and anticipated dream, but a never-found reality.

The litany of innovations, strategies, and acronymns are endless--Parent Child Centers, Upward Bound, Chapter I, Head Start, Job Corps, Follow Through, Home Start. These programs, including their predecessors and progenitors, are primarily the Great Society's compensatory efforts based on prescriptions and assumptions that if only the appropriate method, environment, money, program, materials, and personnel were implemented,

underachieving minority students would catch up with white children. This deficit view assumes that black children are dark-skinned white children who because of cultural, biological, environmental, and social differences lack the adaptations necessary for school achievement.

The deficit educators and policymakers believe that schools exist primarily to transmit a body of prescribed knowledge, skills, values, and norms that are essential for society. This functionalist view, deemphasizes the political nature of schooling and its latent agenda for black and other minority students. It assumes that schools serve their students equally and that schools are meritocratic and value-free. Functionalists believe that education provides intellectually able individuals in this society with the appropriate training necessary for employment and occupational opportunities. They believe that education is positively and directly related to individual and societal productivity and to economic development.

There is an opposing position to this theory of the function of education. Conflict theorists believe that the power of the dominant social group determines economic and educational requirements and that the interest of the powerful is primarily to maintain and reproduce the status quo which results in a system of inequality for others. These theorists, do not search for explanations of black students' lack of achievement by looking at the attributes of programs, interventions, or the perceived shortcomings and handicaps of students and teachers; they focus on schools as institutions that were historically designed and continue to operate in ways that maintain social and economic stratification. There is no such thing as a neutral education process (Freire, 1970). Schools have a socio-political purpose of maintaining the status quo by acting as an agent of social control and only an incidental function of teaching students to solve problems and ask critical questions. As an agent of ideological control, schools preserve their historical purpose-maintaining the existing social order, in which low-income and minority persons are "educated" for less skilled, routine jobs and conditioned by schools for obedience, the acceptance of authority, and external control.

If one acknowledges this perspective, it is clear that no matter the method of instruction or the intervention, black children and other minorities will continue to be at the bottom of the status hierarchy. We can reflect on open classrooms, individualized instruction, new math, mastery learning, discovery learning, competency-based learning, activity centers, and remediation and conclude that these strategies have done very little to enhance the learning opportunities of minority children.

Many believe that black students' school failure and economic depravation are related to their inferior intelligence attributable to blacks' history of slavery, segregation, and limited opportunities. Bowles and Gintis (1983) concluded,

however, that although higher IQ and economic success tend to go together, higher IQs are not an important cause of economic success. They found that the intellectual abilities developed and certified in school contribute little to getting ahead economically. The real function of IQ, they contended, is to "legitimate the social institutions underpinning the stratification itself" (p. 242). Schools, in their view, have a mirror relationship with the workplace.

Economic success tends to run in families, and neither schooling nor IQ contributes much to this relationship (Bowles & Gintis, 1983). Additional Census Bureau data confirm that economic success in this country depends on being born into a wealthy family. Twelve percent of American families control 38% of household wealth, 63% of all stocks, and 52% of all bonds and money markets. This disparity has resulted in a $3,397 net worth for black families compared with $32,667 for white families ("Twelve Parent of U. S. Families," 1986). Duncan (cited in Milner, 1972) found that 28% of the gap between whites and nonwhites was accounted for by differences in family background and only 20% by nonwhites' lower educational achievement.

Milner (1972) reminded us that attempts to narrow this gap between blacks and whites by providing more educational opportunity for blacks are likely to have limited effects. The children of black and white citizens are upwardly mobile in the sense that they will have more education than their parents, simply because average income and the average number of years of formal schooling are increasing. "The crucial question," Milner raised, "is not whether the sons are better educated than fathers, but whether the sons of poorly educated fathers have less education, wealth, and status than the sons of educated fathers?" (p. 43).

Racism and the devalued position of blacks in our society cannot be ignored as a primary contributing factor to black underachievement. Ogbu (1974) claimed that poor school performance is a defense mechanism, an adaptive behavior that black children use to fend off discrimination. Because black children and their parents saw no possibilities for reaching their goals and ambitions, they simply gave up and failed to take school seriously because school had no relevance to their lives or the lives of significant others. Fordham and Ogbu (1986), in another study, said that children respond positively if they observe that older people in their community usually obtain jobs and other societal benefits commensurate with their schooling.

Eli Ginzsburg (1986), in a study sponsored by the National Commission for Employment Policy, corroborated Ogbu's work. In his interviews of 80 Harlem students aged 10-15, a majority of these black youngsters were unable to identify a high school graduate among their relatives, friends, acquaintances who had found the diploma as the way into a good job.

The preponderance of empirical evidence and the existential condition support the credibility of conflict theory. It seems

fair to summarize this section by stating that schools operate overtly and covertly to institutionalize the "caste-like" (Ogbu, 1978) status of black children. Instead of existing to expand opportunities for economic success, as prescriptive ideology suggests, schools institutionalize the unequal distribution of resources and serve as a primary instrument by which the powerful maintain the status quo.

In the following section, the descriptive or institutional context of the model will be discussed by reviewing one school practice that is a contradiction to societal prescriptions and ideologies concerning education. The model maintains that these contradictions primarily generate from bias concerning students' race and class. The practice treated in this section include the teaching of the hidden curriculum, through the practice of ability grouping or tracking.

DESCRIPTIVE PRACTICES THAT HARM BLACK CHILDREN
Unmasking the Hidden Curriculum

Instructional objectives in curriculum guides for elementary and high school students vary little in relationship to the school's location, social class, race of student body, and even students' ability. One could assume that because mandated courses and instructional objectives are similar, children (no matter their race or class) receive correspondent qualitative and quantitative instruction. This assumption is, of course, unfounded. The overt curriculum does not discriminate, but the hidden, or latent, curriculum does. The hidden curriculum is the unstated but influential knowledge, attitudes, norms, rules, rituals, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through structure, policies, processes, formal content, and the social relationships of school. Jackson (1983) has estimated that 90% of what transpires in the classroom fits this definition of hidden curriculum.

This hidden curriculum, according to Apple (1983), is not hidden at all, and what this curriculum teaches the majority of black and low-income children is obedience and deference to authority, docility, subordination, extrinsic motivation, external control, dependence, and fatalism. Adoption of these behaviors ultimately predestines black students to low-paying, low-status jobs, diminished self-concepts and feelings of inferiority.

An observation and interview study by Leacock (1969) of one second-grade and one fifth-grade class in four city schools provides an additional perspective on the workings of the hidden curriculum. The four schools represented a predominantly low income white, low income black, middle income white, and middle income black schools.

Hamilton, (1983) summarized Leacock's findings:

> Middle income schools encouraged students to take initiative and interact with each other through committees and cooperative projects, which were absent in lower income

> school, where teacher-student interaction was much more prominent than student-student. Moreover, proper behavior in the lower income schools appeared to be an end in itself rather than the means to establish a climate for learning, which was in the middle income schools. Teachers in the middle income black school placed much more emphasis on academic learning and were judged to teach more skillfully than teachers in the lower income black school. (p. 326)

Perhaps the seminal work on the social relationships of the hidden curriculum is that of Ray Rist's (1970) work. This longitudinal study of one class of children from kindergarten to second grade is salient because it attests to the relationship between the hidden curriculum and its negative impact on achievement, and because the teachers and the students in the school observed were black, suggesting that when the teacher race variable is eliminated, social class discriminates similarly.

The hidden curriculum in schools often reinforces society's prejudicial view that black children, particularly low-income black children, are incapable and inferior. In Rist's study, teachers had by the eighth day of school, already decided that these low-income children could not learn - they were virtually written off as failures at age 5! In spite of students' effort, performance, and ability, the teachers in Rist's study ignored data that disconfirmed their stereotypes and prejudices. These descriptions illustrate how ineffective schools are, not the "great equalizer of the conditions of man," as Horace Mann acclaimed, but often collaborators in the maintenance of poverty, inequality, and the continued oppression of black people in our society.

Tracking--Educational Ghettos for Black Children

If there is one educational practice that seems to contribute most to the miseducation and nonachievement of black children, it is the practice of placing students in homogenous ability groups.

The use of tracking is still widespread; primarily for the same reason it was instituted in the early 1900's--to separate children by race and class in order to maintain and reproduce a system of social and economic stratification. In addition, tracking is an administrative convenience. Students have to be partitioned into smaller instructional groups and dividing them by ability, on the surface, seems to be sound educational practice. Defenders of the system (Nevi, 1987) claim that it allows for individualized instruction, the development of more positive student self-concepts, and more effective and efficient instruction. But there is overwhelming research evidence that tracking students by ability has no educational benefit for students and in fact is deleterious to academic achievement, extracurricular participation, self-concept, peer relationships, career aspirations, and motivation. Many works support the conclusion that the practice of tracking is indeed curious as

little evidence supports its use in school (Goodlad, 1984; Gouldner, 1978; Hallinan & Sorensen, 1983; Lefkowitz, 1972; Metz, 1978; Oakes, 1985, Persell, 1977; Rist, 1973; Rosenbaum, 1976; Rowan & Miracle, 1983). One author (Oakes, 1985) stated, "homogenous grouping doesn't consistently help anyone learn better" (p. 7).

Tracking begins early in the lives of schoolchildren. Rist's (1970) portrayal of a teacher who made permanent placement assignments by the eighth day of kindergarten is a startling one. It is common practice in elementary schools to assign children to one of three groups--high, average, or low. The children and the faculty know that designations like Cardinals, Robins, and Blue Jays are not simply the names of birds but carry with them differential expectations concerning children's achievement, behavior, future success, and home life. The high school curriculum, however, is where tracking is most prevalent and more firmly institutionalized. Students are placed in tracks that produce various diplomas such as vocational, general, academic, or advanced academic. The number of certificates of attendance - statements basically verifying that the students attended school but failed to achieve - is growing.

How a student gets into a particular track depends on a number of factors. Findley and Bryan (1975) found that 83% of school districts nationwide used achievement or IQ tests. The tests provide the guise of objectivity and accountability used to defend the placements. The mere proliferation of these instruments and the profit-making businesses that administer them are also related to the extensive use of standardized tests in educational decision making.

The decision as to the group in which a child belongs is not based on objective criteria alone. It is not uncommon to find that some advanced classes have students in them whose transcripts do not seem to warrant the placement. Rist (1973) found that teachers used apparent signs of middle-class status in making their decisions-- dress, language, lack of body odor, and skin color. Persistent parents, mostly middle-class ones, also influence their children's placement. A study using data from <u>High School and Beyond</u> (Jones, VanFossen, & Spade, 1987) concluded that students' social class is strongly related to track placement. The researchers found that two thirds or more of high-ability, high-SES students were in the academic track but only one half of the high-ability, low-SES students were enrolled in the academic track. Oakes (1985) and Gouldner (1978) concluded that teachers and counselors have significant latitude in assigning students to classes or groups.

The mere finding that schools assign students to different curricula does not necessarily indicate educational malpractice, nor is it entirely unjustified. Students vary in ability, motivation, persistence, learning style, and numerous other personality traits and behaviors. What is devastating about tracking is that in lower tracks the number of poor and black students is disproportionate, the instruction is inferior

and ineffective, and students suffer psychologically and emotionally.

When tracking is combined with student characteristics of race and class, the result is predictable. Black and poor students are disproportionately enrolled in the lowest ability groups (Eyler, Cook, & Ward, 1982; Metz, 1978; Oakes, 1985; Persell, 1977) a fact that leads to a phenomenon known as resegregation. Resegregation occurs when black students are either intentionally or inadvertently assigned to lower tracks, which result in two schools in one building--one black and one white, "together but unequal" (Welsh, 1986, p. 68). The preponderance of black students in low-ability groups and white children in high-ability groups reinforces beliefs and stereotypes among adults and children that blacks are intellectually inferior to whites.

Meier Steward, and England (cited in Snider, 1987) analyzed extensive, school data from the Office of Civil Rights and the U.S. Census Bureau from 1979 to 1982 regarding factors affecting racial tracking. They concluded that tracking was conscious discrimination to make desegregated school systems more attractive to white parents.

Tracking is undesirable not only because it segregates students but more importantly because the instructional methods used in low-ability groups have been found to be ineffective and to contribute directly to the display of disruptive behaviors frequently displayed by lower tracked students. Many of the teachers who are assigned to these lower tracked groups are often inexperienced, incompetent, or both. Excellent teachers typically have the more advanced classes, and the incompetent ones the low-ability students.

Brophy (cited in Dusek, 1985) summarized the teacher behaviors of teachers who teach low track students, instructional methods that contribute to the further decline of these struggling low-achieving students:

1. Teachers wait less time for lows to answer.
2. Teachers give lows the answer or call on someone else rather than trying to improve lows' responses by giving clues or repeating or rephrasing the question.
3. Teachers reward inappropriate behavior or incorrect answers by lows.
4. Teachers criticize lows more often for failure.
5. Teachers praise lows less frequently than highs for success.
6. Teachers fail to give feedback to the public responses of lows.
7. Teachers pay less attention to lows or interact with them less frequently.
8. Teachers call on lows less often to respond to questions.
9. Teachers seat lows farther away from themselves.
10. Teachers demand less from lows by teaching them less, giving less extended explanations and definitions, and

by accepting poor quality and often inaccurate responses.

11. Teachers interact with lows more privately than publicly.
12. Teachers grade lows more harshly, giving highs the benefit of the doubt in borderline cases.
13. Teachers are less friendly to lows, smiling less often in interactions with them.
14. Teachers give briefer and less informative feedback to the questions of lows.
15. Teachers provide less direct instruction to lows, giving them more opportunity to practice independently. (pp. 309-310)

Allington (1983) found that in reading instruction:

16. Teachers provide more meaningful discussion of stories with highs.
17. Teachers ask highs more comprehension questions.
18. Teachers allow highs to read silently; lows do more reading aloud (a practice that is negatively correlated to achievement).

Finally, tracking affects students' self-concept, their relationships with peers and teachers, and their career aspirations. Oakes (1985) and Persell (1977) found that low-track students felt alienated, inferior, excluded, and negative about themselves. Their interactions with their peers were confrontational and accompanied by frequent outbursts of yelling and fighting, unlike high-track students, who were competitive yet helpful and friendly to each another. The relationships between teachers and students were negative for low-track students and positive for high-track students. Low-track students thought that teachers were punitive and lacked concern for them; high-track students did not feel this way.

What makes this system so pernicious is the fact that once assigned to a track, students seldom move either up or down. Rosenbaum (1976) compared the system of tracking to a tournament. "When you win, you win only the right to go on to the next round; when you lose, you lose forever" (p. 40). He found that movement from one track to another was rare and infrequent and that when students did move they were seven times more likely to move downward than upward. The label of low-or high-achiever is affixed in elementary school, follows the student through the middle years, and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy by high school. Few schools use organizational structures that accommodate students who are above average in one subject and below average in another. These inflexible and unyielding placements assume that one's intelligence is measurable, unidimensional, fixed, unalterable, and that achievement is general, not specific to a subject.

Black students are particularly injured by this practice because their race and class are associated with low achievement. Once placed in the low tracks, they are taught less effectively, they interact hostilely with teachers and

peers, and they develop negative self-esteem, all of which lead to a vicious cycle of school failure and antisocial behaviors. Indeed black students must take responsibility for their behaviors and attitudes that lead to nonachievement, but the educational profession must bear the responsibility for its failure to provide an equal educational opportunity.

This model suggests that some attention must be given to unveiling the hidden curriculum of schools. The unintended consequences, incidental learning, appears to have a more powerful impact on black students' achievement than on their white counterparts. Such classroom environmental and instructional factors as teacher-student interactions, peer instructions, the teachers' use of time and power, the allocation of rewards and resources, the dispensation of punishment, teacher expectations for student success or failure, docility or assertiveness, independence or dependence, deliver strong and pervasive messages to black students concerning their role in schools and the opportunities structures available to them in later life.

Specifically, more attention should be given to how instruction is arranged and how students are grouped to learn. There are alternatives to the present organization of instruction by ability.

One alternative to tracking or homogeneous grouping is Mortimer Adler's (1982) Paideia Proposal. This one-track system of instruction prescribes that all students, whether they are college-bound or not, be given the same type of schooling. This structural change in the curriculum can provide the framework for raised teacher expectations for black students.

Instead of blaming students for inequities that result from environmental factors, the Paideia Proposal recommends one to three years of public preschool education. In addition to the pre-school experience, there are 12 years of study divided into three distinct modes of teaching and learning. The first mode, didactic, includes (but are not limited to): language, literature, mathematics, natural science, history, geography, and social studies. In the second mode, students develop intellectual and learning skills through a method of instruction referred to as coaching, exercises, or supervised practice. The Maleutic or Socratic method, the third mode, is used to improve the understanding of ideas and values.

Oakes' (1986) solution to tracking is a simple and direct approach. She argued that "the first and most obvious way to undo the negative effects of tracking is to reorganize schools so that similar students are not grouped for instruction." (p. 151) She proposed that the curriculum be reconstructed from its present scope and sequence approach, a presentation of series of topics and skills which require prerequisite knowledge and prior mastery of skills, to a curriculum that is organized around themes and ideas. She suggests restructuring the classroom to encompass a variety of teaching methods designed to address the diverse needs of students in a heterogeneous class.

Cooperative learning methods have been promoted primarily by Slavin (1980, 1982, 1987a, 1987b). There is substantial evidence in the literature to suggest that students achieve significantly more in classrooms where they work together rather than alone or in competition with each other. Most relevant are Slavin's findings that cooperative learning methods are particularly successful with black students in all-black and in desegregated schools. Perhaps there is a relationship between Slavin's conclusion and observations that black children are more relational than analytical in their learning style, preferring group-oriented rather than individual activities.

In summary, there are alternatives to tracking, Adler's Paideia Proposal, Oakes' scope and sequence curriculum, and Slavin's cooperative instructional methods offer compelling options. What is certainly required if tracking and its inherent inequities are eliminated and teacher expectations raised for black students are a structural reorganization of the schools and its curriculum, and rethinking long-held assumptions about black students' intelligence and ability.